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ABSTRACT

This position paper by Voices for Illinois Children describes alarming problems faced by Illinois children and proposes legislative and programmatic interventions. It is noted that the well-being of children in Illinois has deteriorated dramatically in the past 10 years, and that significant improvements in policies and programs for children are desperately needed. The paper is organized in two parts. Part 1 contains sections on early childhood, health, and education, with each section listing various problems and then suggesting actions to alleviate them. Problems addressed include: young children at risk of failure; insufficient and inadequate day care for children of working parents; infant mortality and avoidable childhood diseases; school failure; and inadequate financing of Illinois public schools. Part II contains sections on poverty and economic opportunity, family stability, and juvenile justice. Topics discussed include: (1) work disincentives in the welfare program; (2) inadequacy of the Aid for Dependent Children grant level; (3) the inequitable state tax burden on poor working families with children; (5) the excessive number of children becoming state wards before efforts are made to preserve their families; and (6) lack of support for alternatives to detention for delinquent youth. Appendixes include a summary of new expenditures, and lists of the board of directors and staff. (SKC)

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A Children's Agenda, 1988

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"Our stature as a strong and ethical nation rests on our willingness and capacity to care for our young."

These words began The Plan of Action for Children, 1987, a detailed report that was put together by a task force of Illinois business, civic, and community leaders. The report clearly illustrates that the well being of children in Illinois has deteriorated dramatically in the past ten years, and that significant improvements in both policies and programs for children are desperately needed.

Such improvements were described in the Plan's series of recommendations culled from interviews with experts drawn from government, research institutions, service organizations, and advocacy groups. The task force, of which I was a member, agreed that these proposals should not become footnotes in other reports. We decided that an organization should be formed that could compel action for children in Illinois. Out of this idea, and the hard work of task force members, Voices for Illinois Children (VIC) was created.

Voices for Illinois Children is a statewide child advocacy organization governed by business, community, and civic leaders that works to improve the lives of Illinois children. The Plan of Action for Children, 1987 forms the foundation for our work.

Since its inception, VIC has worked to marshal resources for children on both statewide and community levels. VIC also works in concert with other organizations to increase the public's understanding and support of policies and programs that would make a significant, positive impact on children in Illinois.

The following Children's Agenda, 1988 contains descriptions of alarming problems currently faced by Illinois children and proposals for legislative and programmatic interventions that address these issues.

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This report represents the final product of a process of study, evaluation and reflection. The recommendations do not reflect the total picture of what is needed for children in our state to live healthy and secure lives. They do reflect areas of critical need that could be addressed through legislative and programmatic actions that are within reach, if we only have the will to do what is necessary to achieve them.

As The Plan of Action for Children and other reports have noted, if we do not care for our children the cost of our failure will be prohibitive in both human and financial terms. They will grow to adulthood too impaired to function as productive, independent men and women.

It is our hope and expectation that this Children's Agenda will form the basis for action by policy makers in the public and private sectors.

We invite you to join with us as we pursue these actions over the coming months. We must reverse the deteriorating condition of children, or the cost of our indifference will be continued suffering and the destruction of human potential.

Jeanette Bitter
Chair

SUMMARY

The compelling reason for our Agenda is the desperate condition of thousands of Illinois children. Our goals are practical, cost-effective changes that will improve their lives and set the least fortunate on the road to a healthier and more secure future.

The facts about the children who are most in need of help are grim:

* The infant mortality rate in some Illinois communities is more than 21 deaths per thousand live births, twice the national average.

* One out of every five children in Illinois lives in a family with a cash income below the poverty line.

* Only a small fraction of three-to-five year olds who are at risk of starting first grade far behind their peers are enrolled in the preschool programs that would help them catch up.

* 45 percent of Chicago's high school students drop out of school.

* Less than a quarter of low-income families whose young children qualify for subsidized day care receive such help.

* Too many neglected children who could be safely helped in their own homes are made wards of the state, and too many youth who commit non-violent delinquent acts are locked up unnecessarily.

Our Agenda describes some strategies for alleviating these problems. Our two major goals are:

I. giving babies and young children who are at risk a good start in life; and

II. giving families in trouble a fair chance to cope with their problems.

A good start for children includes expansion of early childhood education, to help children who are in danger of starting school behind their peers. We urge an increase in the state-funded Children at Risk of Educational Failure preschool program, and a restructuring of this program to provide assistance to the children of working parents.

We propose an increase in state-funded, quality day care and support pending federal day care legislation. This increase in funds would begin the process of catching up with the demonstrated need for decent subsidized care for single mothers and parents in the work force.

A good start for children necessarily requires a reduction in our state's tragic infant mortality rate. We propose an extension of medical benefits to uninsured pregnant women.

Under the proposal of a fair chance for families, we recommend help for families to move from welfare to work through the extension of Medicaid and day care benefits for AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) recipients returning to work, and an increase in other work incentives. Grants to families who rely on AFDC must keep pace with the standard of need.

Families who neglect their children would also be given a reasonable chance and the appropriate help to sort out their difficulties themselves, through the appropriation of funds for the Illinois Family Preservation Act.

Finally, we think that most non-violent delinquents are best dealt with in their own communities. We propose an expansion of the diversion programs begun in the early 1970s as an alternative to the incarceration of young people.

Where our proposals cost money, we have estimated the additional costs in state and federal expenditures. The expenditure figures in the text are yearly cost figures.

Several principles have shaped these proposals. Wherever it is possible, prevention is preferable to cure. It is much better to give families the resources they need to help themselves than to remove children from their homes. Some programs that need additional funds will not achieve their goals without significant reforms. Communities must be given the opportunity to plan their own responses to the problems that concern them most.

PART I: A Good Start for Babies and Young Children

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EARLY CHILDHOOD

PROBLEM: Young Children at Risk of Educational Failure

Too many Illinois children are dropping out of school. Too many who stay in school are failing to learn. The roots of high school failure go back to the earliest years of children's education. Children who enter first grade behind their peers are likely to stay behind, partly because they are not given the opportunity to catch up, and partly because they are labeled "failures" at that early age.

ACTION: Expand Early Childhood Education

Preschool education programs have a proven record of helping less-prepared children get ready for school. The standard-bearing preschool program is Head Start. The landmark Ypsilanti Perry Preschool project, a 22-year study, reported in 1984 that Head Start children were much more likely to graduate from high school and to find employment quickly than were children in a non-Head Start control group. They were also much less likely to be arrested, or receive welfare assistance.

Illinois has 22,000 children enrolled in Head Start and 7,500 three-to-five year olds registered in the state-funded Children at Risk of Educational Failure preschool program. Head Start enrolls less than 25 percent of eligible children, and the Children at Risk program enrolls only 7 percent of children who qualify. By expanding the budget allocation from the current $12.7 million to $75 million, the Children at Risk program could expand coverage to 44,000 children, or just over one third of the eligible children in Illinois.

The Children at Risk program should be restructured to provide more help to the children of working parents. Programs must respond more effectively to the needs of these children. Most of the current programs are half-day programs and are situated in public schools. School boards should collaborate with Head Start and day care programs to make the best use of resources, and make it easier for parents to arrange a full day's care. The school boards also should pay more attention to the unmet needs of low-income and language minority children.

Day care programs should incorporate the "Good Teaching Practices for 4- and 5-Year-Olds" of the National Association for the Education of Young Children as the standards for the Children at Risk program.

PROBLEM: Insufficient and Inadequate Day Care for Children of Working Parents

Mothers of young children are entering the work force at an increasing rate. Currently, half of all married mothers with infants under age one are in the labor force, representing a 108-percent increase since 1970. In 1986, 60 percent of mothers whose youngest children were between three and five years old were employed. But child care opportunities have not kept pace with this trend, and those child care places that do exist are not affordable. Some of them are not of high enough quality to ensure young children a good start in life.

The paucity of decent, subsidized day care keeps some women out of the work force and on AFDC. Therefore it keeps some families in poverty who could otherwise move out of poverty by a combination of work and day care subsidies, and it robs some young children of an experience that could prepare them for school and put them on an even footing with their more fortunate peers.

ACTION: Increase State-Funded, Good-Quality Child Care for Low-Income Families

In FY '88 the Department of Children and Family Services' budget includes approximately $43 million for day care, funding 18,100 day care slots. Even adding the Department of Public Aid's $6-million line for extended day care, this leaves the state far short of providing subsidized day care for all eligible children. There are an estimated 100,000 children under six years old in Illinois with employed parents who are financially eligible for this service.

The Department of Children and Family Services day care appropriation should be increased by $30 million in FY '89, to begin the process of catching up with demonstrated need.

ACTION: Support the Recommendations of the Governor's Task Force on Day Care

Employment policies make a significant difference in a working family's capacity to cope with the demands of the job and child-rearing. Employer support ranges from day care referral services to financial assistance and on-site day care. The Governor's Task Force on Day Care recommended a series of personnel policies that would ease the burden on working parents. These include the introduction of flextime, job sharing and dependent care sick leave, and changes in maternity and paternity leave. The state should provide financial incentives for employers who adopt these measures, to offset some of the costs of implementation.

ACTION: Establish State Standards for the Education of Day Care Providers, and a Rate-Setting Structure for Subsidized Care

The quality of day care in both homes and centers depends to a large degree on the training and wage structure of day care providers. The state should:
(1) develop a statewide education and training plan for all providers; and
(2) develop a rate-setting structure for subsidized care that contains incentives for improved quality.

ACTION: Support Proposed Federal Legislation for Day Care Funding

The nationwide Alliance for Better Child Care has drafted federal legislation, called the Act for Better Child Care Services (ABC), which would authorize $2.5 billion in new grants for FY '89. Approximately $94 million would be allocated to Illinois. Seventy-five percent of the new allocations to states would be reserved to help families earning up to 115 percent of the individual states' median income to purchase child care.

Ten percent of the funds are targeted to allow existing preschool and Head Start programs to extend their hours to provide full-day, year-round child care for eligible working parents. The bill describes a process for the establishment of federal standards for all licensed child care. States would have to implement these standards within five years to maintain their eligibility for funding. Several other day care financing bills have been introduced into the House and the Senate.

HEALTH

PROBLEM: Infant Mortality and Avoidable Childhood Disabilities

Illinois has one of the worst infant mortality rates in the country. Particular groups in the state population have infant death rates considerably in excess of the national rate of 10.6 per thousand live births. In Chicago the overall rate is 16.5. For black babies, the mortality rate is 21.6. There is not even an accurate count of mortality among babies in the Hispanic community.

One factor in infant mortality is the lack of prenatal care. Inadequate prenatal care often leads to medical complications during pregnancy and child birth, complications that can result in low birth weight, infant death, and a lifetime of unnecessary handicaps. Low-birth-weight infants often require very expensive neonatal care, and sometimes long-term institutional and medical care.

In Illinois each year, approximately 11,400 low-income women whose family incomes are below the federal poverty level and who have inadequate medical insurance, or no medical insurance, deliver babies. These are working women who have low-paying jobs that do not offer insurance benefits, or who are supported by husbands without family health coverage. These women are ineligible for AFDC because their incomes are too high. They are eligible for Medical Assistance No-Grant (MANG) only after they have met the monthly "spend-down." Monthly spend-down is the amount by which monthly income exceeds a designated Medicaid eligibility level.

Under the current system, a woman receives no state medical assistance unless the cost of the care exceeds her spend-down level. The spend-down amount has to be recalculated every month in a complicated procedure. Both the spend-down requirement and the monthly recalculation process discourage women from getting the inexpensive prenatal care that can mean the difference between a healthy baby and a sick baby.

ACTION: Expand Medical Coverage for Uninsured Pregnant Women

The 1986 Sixth Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (SOBRA) established an unprecedented opportunity to use federal money to help the state by paying half the cost of prenatal and pregnancy-related care for this group of poor women and their infants. HB 295, signed into law by Governor Thompson in the summer of 1987, mandates the state to provide a plan for the coverage of eligible women by July 1, 1988. The law also allows the Department of Public Aid to provide medical care to uninsured pregnant women and their families when the family income is at or below the poverty level.

To take full advantage of this opportunity, Illinois should enroll in this program immediately and include as eligible recipients women and children who are at the maximum income and age levels allowed by federal law. Congress has adopted legislation to raise the income ceiling to 185 percent of the poverty level.

While the initial gross cost to the state of extending these benefits to women at or below the poverty line is about $2 million, the state is likely to experience a net cost saving in the first program year. This cost saving would result from a reduced need for neonatal intensive care and rehospitalization in the first year of life.

EDUCATION

PROBLEM: School Failure

Our urban schools are failing to educate a large percentage of our children. The problem is particularly acute in Chicago, where 45% of high school students drop out before they graduate. Many of the students who do graduate are not prepared for a competitive job market. Two thirds of the graduates cannot read at grade level. Half of the city's schools rank in the bottom one percent in the country in their students' American College Test scores. Only eight percent of students who enter the city's racially isolated high schools as ninth graders both graduate and can read at levels above the national average.

ACTION: Restructure the Chicago Public Schools

Since the early 1970s two related practices for school improvement have been implemented in a broad cross-section of school districts in different parts of the country. The first, known as the effective schools movement, emphasizes educational practices that have a demonstrated effect on school achievement in poor inner city neighborhoods. The practices include high expectations for student achievement, close monitoring of progress, more class time used for learning, and the principal becoming the active educational leader of the school.

The second practice is school site governance, the purpose of which is to place responsibility and authority where the key business of the school system takes place, in the individual school. School site governance is a two-way process: the school is given hiring and supervisory control over its staff, and the power to amend its budget and curriculum within state and city guidelines. At the same time it is held responsible for the achievement levels of its students.

School site governance creates a context for improved schools. It does not in itself improve schools, but makes it easier for a school to introduce effective practices. It is particularly important in large urban school districts where entrenched, unresponsive boards of education drain the energy and creativity of individual schools.

Under a school site governance plan each school in Chicago would have a school council composed of representatives of staff and parents. The council would have authority to construct a school improvement plan, hire staff, construct a school budget within state and city guidelines and make changes in a standard curriculum to achieve school improvement goals.

The Chicago schools, like their downstate counterparts, need additional funds. But the Chicago public school system is so inadequate that extra funding will accomplish nothing without a restructuring of the governance of individual schools accompanied by effective accountability processes.

PROBLEM: Inadequate Financing of Illinois Public Schools

There is a statewide school funding crisis in Illinois. Illinois now ranks 41st among states in per-capita state aid to education. The state share of the total education budget has dropped from 48 percent in 1975-76 to 42 percent in 1986-87. Illinois is 22nd in total spending per pupil, with local property taxes making up most of the difference.

In individual school districts across the state, these figures mean deficits and lay-offs. At the beginning of this school year the Valley View public schools in Romeoville and Bolingbrook faced a deficit of $1.5 million and responded with further reductions in personnel, programs, supplies and maintenance. With less state aid than it received last year, the Lombard elementary school district faced a deficit of $600,000. The Woodland Community district in Streator, Illinois reported a declining local tax base and a loss of state support in excess of $100,000. In Quincy, officials drew up a worst-case budget that called for $2.9 million in cuts over three years, resulting in the loss of 145 full-time positions.

ACTION: Increase Investment in Education for Illinois Children

The state must fulfill its constitutional role of having the prime responsibility for education. The state should increase its school aid to the level of providing 50 percent of the total cost of elementary and secondary education. Each school district has the responsibility of ensuring that these additional funds are used primarily at the school and classroom level. The State School Superintendent's proposal to increase spending for elementary and high schools in FY '89 by $400 million is an important step toward adequate state funding. Extra funding should not, however, be provided without significant reform in the Chicago Public Schools.

PART II: A Fair Chance for Families

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POVERTY AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

PROBLEM: Work Disincentives in the Welfare Program

Welfare is currently organized in a way that discourages the return to work. Most recipients who have been working for one year lose all cash benefits. Even during the first year of work, recipients lose a dollar of their grants for every dollar earned, after a very low income ceiling has been reached. Recipients who take temporary work are particularly hard hit because, for the first two months after the temporary job is over, the recipient family receives an AFDC grant based on its income while the wage earner was still employed.

In practice, a former recipient working at the minimum wage who has exhausted his or her grant eligibility can afford neither day care nor medical insurance. Moreover, most recipients who secure employment are eligible for Medicaid and subsidized day care only during the first six months of their employment.

ACTION: Extend Medicaid and Day Care Benefits for AFDC Recipients Returning to Work

AFDC recipients who find work should be eligible for good-quality subsidized day care for their children for the first twelve months of employment. Their medical benefits should also be extended from six months to twelve months. The extension of day care will cost $6.3 million. The cost of extending medical benefits will be between $1.1 million and $3.3 million, depending on usage.

These expenditures will cover the medical expenses of all of the 30,000 families leaving the welfare rolls each year, and the day care expenses of approximately 20 percent of those families.

ACTION: Increase Other Work Incentives

The penalty for short-term employment should be removed, by supplementing the partial monthly grants when AFDC families' disposable income falls because of decreases in employment income. This proposal, which is a return to prior procedure, would cost $2.5 million.

When employed AFDC recipients calculate their eligiblity for cash assistance, they are able to disregard only $75 of their work expenses. The $75 "disregard" does not cover a worker's legitimate work expenses, and should be increased to $150 a month, allowing workers to keep an additional $75 of their earnings. This change will cost $12 million.

These two changes will benefit the 14,000 "earned income" families who receive welfare grants.

PROBLEM: Inadequacy of the AFDC Grant Level

An increasing percentage of Illinois children are growing up in conditions of poverty. One out of every five children in Illinois lives in a family with cash income below the official poverty line. The AFDC grant level is not high enough to provide a family with the basic necessities. The 1988 grant level for a family of four in Cook County is $385 a month, with a maximum food stamp allotment of $268. That $653 total constitutes only 65 percent of the Federal poverty level, the minimum amount required to sustain a family for a temporary period of time. Between 1970 and 1985, the real value of the Illinois grant for a family of four dropped 51 percent.

The state also has a low-income benchmark, the standard of need. The current grant level for a family of three is $342 a month. The standard of need for the same family is $713 a month, and the poverty level is $775 a month. Thus, the current grant is only 48 percent of the standard of need. Even with the addition of the $214 food stamp allotment the total is only $556 a month, or 80 percent of the standard of need.

Such extreme poverty produces homelessness, malnutrition, and exceptional rates of illness and disease. In consequence, it reduces the chances of children raised in such poverty of becoming productive, independent and healthy adults.

ACTION: Increase the Value of the AFDC Grant

The Public Aid Code should be amended to prevent the grants from falling below 55 percent of the state standard of need. The state should agree to a plan which eventually would allow the complete package of public aid benefits to reach 100 percent of the standard of need. The estimated state cost of raising all grants to 55 percent of the standard is $90 million. The additional Federal cost would be $60 million.

PROBLEM: Inequitable State Tax Burden on Poor Working Families with Children

The 1986 Federal tax reform legislation removed a significant number of low-income people from the federal income tax rolls, and thereby contributed to a fairer distribution of the income tax burden. Even before this change, however, state and local taxes were the largest part of the tax burden on poor families. In Illinois the poorest 20 percent of taxpayers pay 9.5 percent of their incomes in state and local taxes, compared to the richest one percent, who contribute 4.1 percent of their incomes to those taxes. Between 1971 and 1985 the value of the state personal exemption has declined 62 percent in constant dollars.

ACTION: Enact State Tax Relief

The state should target a measure of tax relief to poor families with children. The relief plan should be one that is limited to a targeted group of low-income families and that, in consequence, is cost effective.

FAMILY STABILITY

PROBLEM: Too Many Children Become State Wards Before Serious Efforts Are Made to Preserve Their Families

In child welfare services, as in many other areas, an ounce of prevention really is worth a pound of cure. Providing a family in trouble with protective day care, emergency financial assistance, homemaker services, advocacy or counseling can make the difference between the family's ability to cope with its problems and the eventual removal of neglected children from the home. Unfortunately, these family preservation services have never attracted the support they deserve. Placement prevention services, which accounted for 7.3 percent of the Department of Children and Family Services budget in 1981, amounted to only 6.0 percent of the 1988 budget.

Without these family support strategies, there is often no choice between ignoring a family's condition and taking the children into surrogate care. This missed opportunity is a tragedy for the children and their families. It is also very expensive for the state. Preventive strategies cost only a fraction of the expense involved in long-term foster or group home care. Maryland officials, for example, calculate that their state saves $6.2 million in averted foster care costs for every 1,000 children receiving intensive family support services.

ACTION: Implement Federal and State Mandates to Preserve Families

The 1980 Federal Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act addressed this problem by requiring that states try to preserve family unity before removing children from their homes on neglect and abuse petitions. In 1987 Illinois passed the Family Preservation Act, which requires the Department of Children and Family Services to offer family preservation services to any family that is the subject of an "indicated" case of abuse or neglect. No funds, however, were appropriated for implementing the provisions of the Act. $3 million should be appropriated to this program for FY '89, in addition to the funds currently allocated to family preservation services.

The extra funds will not help-- they may not even be expended-- if the Department fails to comply with the spirit of the new law. Before ordering children's removal from their homes, the juvenile divisions of the county courts must make sure that, in all appropriate cases, reasonable efforts have been made to keep the families together.

JUVENILE JUSTICE

PROBLEM: Lack of Support for Alternatives to Corrections for Delinquent Youth

Two recent trends demonstrate the need for expanding creative alternatives for juvenile delinquents who do not, for their own or their communities' safety, need to be incarcerated. The first trend is the increasing commitment of delinquents to detention. In Cook County, while the number of delinquency filings has increased slowly during the past seven years, the number of delinquency adjudications has increased dramatically, by 104 percent. In the same period the number of detention intakes and the number of commitments to the Department of Corrections have increased by more than 50 percent. While some of these youth need to be in locked facilities, many of them do not. The most critical need for these youth is help in staying out of trouble, completing their education, and finding and keeping their first jobs.

The second trend is the inadequate support for the state's main alternative to corrections program, the Unified Delinquency Intervention Service (UDIS). UDIS serves adjudicated delinquents in their own communities, thereby increasing the chance that young people will remain connected with their families, educational possibilities and job opportunities. At its peak funding UDIS provided advocacy, counseling, educational, and vocational services. It also provided a variety of residential programs.

In FY '76, UDIS was funded at $2,366,000. Despite favorable reviews, the program lost all of its funding in the first half of 1982, and in FY '87 it was funded at only $1,145,000. As a consequence, in FY '87, 51 counties in Illinois had juveniles admitted to the Department of Corrections but referred no youth to UDIS programs. For these young people there were no alternatives to corrections.

For a few young people, however, the lack of alternatives has even graver consequences than unecessary commitment to detention or juvenile correctional facilities. In some less populous counties in Illinois, the federal statues that prohibit the incarceration of status offenders and the placement of juveniles in adult facilities are being broken. In 1986, 5,100 juveniles were detained in county jails and municipal lock-ups built primarily for adult offenders.

ACTION: Expand Alternatives to Corrections

Fresh initiatives should be launched for non-violent delinquents through expansion of the diversion programs begun in the early 1970s. The current diversion program, the Unified Delinquency Intervention Service, should receive $1 million in additional funds for FY '89. This would permit full UDIS services in counties now covered by UDIS contracts, and allow the expansion of UDIS services to all the counties in the state.

ACTION: End the Placement of Juveniles in Adult Prisons

Federal statutes discouraging the incarceration of status offenders and the placement of juveniles in adult facilities should be enforced throughout the state. But the Federal Government can act only through civil rights and education for handicapped children statutes, or by threatening the curtailment of certain federal funds. The state legislature should therefore pass legislation that expressly prohibits this practice.

SUMMARY OF NEW EXPENDITURES

(Annual Costs)

Program	State Resources ($ million)	Federal Resources* ($ million)
Children at Risk	62.3	
DCFS Day Care	30.0	
ABC Day Care		94.0
Medical Coverage for Uninsured Pregnant Women	2.1	2.1
Elementary and High School Education	400.0	
Extended Day Care and Medicaid	8.3	
AFDC Work Incentives	14.5	
AFDC Grant	90.0	60.0
Family Preservation	3.0	
Alternatives to Corrections (UDIS)	1.0	
TOTAL:	**611.2**	**156.1**

*Illinois share of federal expenditures.

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Vice President and General Counsel

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Vice President, Policy Development and Research

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Receptionist/Bookkeeper